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## DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL EDWARD CARDON, DEPUTY COMMANDER, TASK FORCE MARNE, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION-CENTRAL VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA):  
Brigadier General Edward Cardon, deputy commander of Task Force Marne, MND-Central, with us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable.

Good morning, sir. How are you?

GEN. CARDON: Doing good.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Do you have an opening statement for us this morning?

GEN. CARDON: I do -- a fairly short one, because I'm looking forward to getting to the questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sounds good. Well, sir, the floor is yours.

GEN. CARDON: Okay. Well first, hello to everyone. Ed Cardon here. Let me just make a few remarks.

My areas of responsibility are governance, economic redevelopment, economic reconstruction. But I can pretty much talk about anything in Task Force Marne. But the struggle for the economic and political progress in Iraq is often overlooked, and at times, I'll say, is more frustrating than the efforts to improve security. And right now I'm somewhat disappointed with the political progress in that it hasn't been as rapid as the security progress we've made just over the last few weeks.

If you go back to the purpose of the surge, it was to get the security situation to a point where you could have political growth. I think we're doing that pretty well. But the political progress right now is moving much slower than expected, although it is moving, especially at the lower levels.

The real challenge is, is to get the provincial governments to make the transition from the state-run economy to one based on revenue-sharing from Iraq's national government. And we deal with four provinces, that being Karbala, Najaf, Babil and Wasat. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams and embedded Provincial

Reconstruction Teams, often called PRTs, from the State Department help us build this capacity, although State is still surging to meet the requirements for -- (inaudible).

As an example, the provinces received \$374 million from the Iraqi government this year. Some are doing well at getting their budgets and some are really struggling. And there's a national average of just over 40 percent right now. The reason for this is that many of the provinces still lack the processes necessary to spend the money and to program future spending to keep things, such as a new school, operating. It's a conversion from a project focus to a program focus. For example, you know, a school is just a building, but there's the components surrounding the school house because it needs infrastructure, water, electricity; it needs furniture, it needs supplies, it needs teachers, and it needs students. And that's a program, not a project. And they're making some good progress in that area.

Also working hard to build government capacity. Sometimes that's training, sometimes that's enabling the government, sometimes it's just providing moral support. But what we really do is try and link the provincial government to the national government, the local government to the provincial government, working on plans for security and cooperation and coordination with each other, and that is the hard work of personal engagement.

People often ask about the clock. There's a growing awareness among Iraqi leaders at the political pressure in the United States for our troop withdrawal. And the Iraqis feel the pressure of a clock, and they widely acknowledge that if we pull out early, things will be a real mess and they're going to pay a price.

That's putting some pressure on them for political developments, because ultimately Iraq has to lead Iraq. And the importance of the economic and political progress in Iraq if we do this right generates a stability such that we won't need as much military power, whether that's Iraqi military power or coalition military power.

So what have we done here just in the last month or so? As we work with each province, we work on 100-day plan that brings us through September. It helps provide a focus and some benchmarks to improve both security and local governance. This could be everything from taking out a local AQI sanctuary to opening a jail to developing a provincial development strategy to spend their budget.

With the political process building slow -- (inaudible) -- actively and violently working to make that process fail. And as our combat operations clear areas and then we hold them with Iraqi police and army and the hard work of governance -- (inaudible) -- is advancing, more slowly than we'd like to be sure but it is advancing.

And with that, I'll take your questions.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir, thank you very much.

David Axe, you were first online. Why don't you get us started?

Q Hi, General, this is David Axe, I write for Military.com, Wired's Danger Room and Aviation Week.

Can you go into some more detail about your relationship with the State Department? Is it limited only to the PRTs? Or are -- is there a growing State Department presence elsewhere?

GEN. CARDON: No, there's no -- we're actually paired with three PRTs: Karbala, Najaf and Babil. But the Karbala and Najaf PRTs are quite small, one or two people. The Babil PRT is fairly large. And then we have -- right now we have three of five embedded PRTs on the ground, although all of them are missing some -- even the ones, the three that we do have are still -- are missing some people. There's no polad or embassy rep at division level. So I work with the embassy, with the office of provincial affairs and others in the embassy, and then I work with the PRTs.

Q Would greater State assistance benefit this governance process?

GEN. CARDON: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I mean, we're short, and I'll tell you, you just can't replace what their -- their experience.

I'll give an example here. Tom Timberman down in North Babil -- 30 years of development of experience -- nobody in our forces has that kind of experience. So he came in, he took a(n) assessment of the situation, he decided he could use a model community process. He has eight model communities. He's got USAID in there. He figured out how to leverage the -- all of the assets for the embassy and the government to help make these communities move much faster. Just that kind of linkage alone makes things move fast, and we're looking forward to getting the rest of our PRTs.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Excellent. Andrew.

Q General, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin out for ON Point. In the scheme of a clear, hold and build, how are the Iraqi army units doing as far as the holding and helping you build, mostly in Babil province?

GEN. CARDON: Well, the army units are, from my experience here in 2005 -- are much, much better. The police -- or our national police are the same or maybe even worse, and the regular police is very much a mixed bag, depending on the leadership; in the Babil province, that's the 8th Iraqi Army Division. Many of those units are already at their readiness level; one, they're still -- (audio break) -- and generally, the problem is there's not enough of them.

And some of these areas that we're clearing out, we have cleared just to a point that we can hold. And what's starting to fill the gap with the Iraqi security units are these concerned citizens that are,

you know, tired of al Qaeda, of these extremist groups and have, you know -- protect their own neighborhoods. I just want to make it clear that we don't arm them, we don't pay them or any of this. But we do acknowledge that they can secure their own areas, and in some areas, that's having a real impact on the enemy as they push al Qaeda out.

Q Okay. Can I just kind of follow up with that, on that one?

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q General, why don't you arm them and train them? If they're helping out -- if they're better than the IPs, why not use them more?

GEN. CARDON: Well, what we have done is we're taking these lists and we're working with the Iraqi government to get them into the Iraqi security forces, and we just recently have provided several hundred names both to the minister of Interior and minister of Defense.

The concern is -- by the Iraqi government, and rightly so, is that if you arm them and train them and they're outside of the government of Iraq, then you're training another militia, and that's a valid concern. So everything that we're doing (is ?) trying to make sure that these concerned citizens are linked to the government and not to a(n) outside armed group that would work against the government.

And so this is a touchy area with the Iraqi government, but I think that we -- the Iraqi government agrees with what we're doing and wants to bring these citizen groups in as fast as possible into their government structure.

Q Okay. But aren't the Marines doing that in Anbar? Aren't they arming the local groups?

GEN. CARDON: Well, they aren't arming them, because almost everybody in Iraq already has a weapon.

Q Okay.

GEN. CARDON: But the --

Q "Organized" might be a better word, then.

GEN. CARDON: Yeah, they're organized. And actually, they're -- and generally they organize themselves along tribal lines. And so, you know, you normally start to deal with the sheikh, whether that be Sunni or Shi'a, and then, you know, he organizes it.

And that's -- the success of Al Anbar has actually, you know, continued to spread across -- (short audio break) -- belts (of ?) southern Baghdad and is even starting to swing all the way around -- you know, around the east side. And so there's some -- this is really a great development that's buying some time for some political development if we can get the political development to move a little

bit quicker.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thanks. Grim.

Q Good morning. This is Grim of Blackfive.net. I want to ask you a question about how the economic development and the security situations are linked. The question has to do with some things we did in the early days of the war. You may know the group Spirit of America. It was a charity -- it still is a charity -- that took up money and then tried to help local units on the ground provide things like sewing machines to Iraqi women so they could build some small pools of capital by making garments, things like that.

One of the things we found was that no sooner would we get these little sewing centers built than the insurgents would come destroy them in order to attack the reconstruction efforts. Is the surge moving that -- we're still seeing spectacular attacks. Are we getting to the point that they're now doing spectacular attacks more and not having the resources to concentrate on your reconstruction projects, or are they still able to carry out effective attacks on reconstruction projects also?

GEN. CARDON: Well, clearly, we're having an effect on the ability to conduct spectacular attacks; however, they still happen. And, you know, we're getting better on that every day, and I think the surge has had a definite impact on the ability for spectacular attacks.

I think that the (potential ?) to use these programs like they had with Spirit of America is better now than it was even two years ago when I was last here. And the reason for that is, a lot of these areas are now being secured by local -- just local (citizenry ?).

The bigger problem now is the Iranian economic influence in Iraq, which is the -- because there's no tariffs and the borders basically are wide open, the Iranians and others -- it's not just Iranians, but in our area, southern Iraq, you mostly feel it from Iran -- they're importing, you know, low-cost goods into Iraq which then compete against Iraqi business, and it's hard for Iraqi business to compete against mass production -- mass, low-cost production. And that is a problem we're trying to address.

But that's, you know, a large issue, and so part of that is to bring on some of the larger, state-owned enterprises through a series of loans and grants under, you know, the Task Force for Business and Stabilization Operation -- Task Force BSO is what we call -- and use some targeted areas to try and work against this.

And we're hopeful -- I just talked to them -- I'm pretty hopeful that we'll get about 3,000 or 4,000 jobs down in the Babil area, a little bit in Najaf here, over the next two months.

But economic development has been a serious problem for a couple of reasons; one is security, one is freedom of movement; it's the

ability to get your goods to market when you have some sort of sectarian issue. You don't generally have those problems when, you know, it's all one province or all one sect. But if you have to come across, and they've been radicalized by these spectacular attacks, then it's an issue.

Q Are you -- just a quick question about the tariff issue. Do you expect the Iraqi government to move on raising tariffs in order to address that problem?

GEN. CARDON: I don't know. I know they're aware of the problem. But right now I've seen no effort from them to impose tariffs of any kind.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Streiff.

Q I'll pass.

MR. HOLT: Okay, any follow-up questions? Did somebody else join us?

Q Jarred Fishman joined, sir.

MR. HOLT: Ah, yes, Jarred. So do you have a question for General Cardon?

Q Yeah. Good afternoon, sir. Could you just explain -- I put out a weekly "good news" report, which has a pretty large distribution, and usually come up with 20, 25 articles lately because things have been going so well. If there was one thing where you would way this exemplifies the progress we're making in the last week to two weeks, what would that project be?

GEN. CARDON: Well, in the last two weeks I would point to our big operation we just finished which -- well, it's still ongoing -- but Operation Marne Torch. This was an al Qaeda sanctuary. It was a source of accelerants into Baghdad, a place where car bombs and IEDs, sectarian violence -- sectarian killings, I should say, not violence -- were taking place. Because we got the surge forces -- and two of our brigades from 3rd Infantry are part of this -- we cleaned that out.

Now, in the beginning, people had really one big question: Are you going to stay? And when we told them yes, then they started coming forth and saying, "Look, this person's bad, that person's bad. Hey, let us secure our own area, let us be concerned citizens."

And so we're seeing a complete flip in this area where you used to see -- it used to be incredibly violent.

And make no mistake, we used a very kinetic approach here, using the Air Force, our own Apache helicopters, artillery. But we -- in

the areas that we've been through already, that part is over. And now it's about building -- holding on to what we have with security forces trying to recruit and now trying to get the -- you know, today, the big discussion was, how do we get these water, you know, flowing in these canals. And to me, that is a good news story for Baghdad and a good news story for the citizens of what's called Arab Jabour.

Q And if I could just ask a quick follow-up, I've put the Arab Jabour stories in, but why is it then that we actually see real developments on the ground and that Congress is invited to briefings of a classified nature, not this open source nature, and yet still you hear the mantra: Things get worse; nothing has changed; there's zero progress on the ground. Where's the disconnect there?

GEN. CARDON: Well, that's hard for me to answer because, you know, I'm over here and I see progress on the ground. What I think a lot -- I've had a few senators come through. And their greatest disappointment generally is, you know, at the national level and their ability to deliver a national level of reconciliation. Now I can't really speak to that because, you know, that's out of my lane.

But I would say at the local level, we're starting to have some success in this area. And you know, it's not perfect and there's still potential for some, you know, pretty serious violence in some areas. But you're starting to sense this -- you're starting to get a sense that we may have turned a corner in some of these areas that have been violent for a long time.

Another area, for example, that's really turned is this area called Qarghuli Village, which is on the Euphrates River. It was violently anti-coalition; it was where our soldiers were murdered on the 12th of May. And since we -- as a result of that, we did huge operations down there. And we're still looking for two of our soldiers that are missing and we follow up on every lead.

But you go to that village today, and it is secure. And they are working with us and, you know, we're starting to get some local development down there. It's amazing, the difference just since the 12th of May.

So just since this time here, I've been here since March. And when I look where we are now in July, the security progress in our area has been quite good. It has been a little bit slower, getting the political progress. And some of it can be laid back in the national government, but some of it's definitely in local capacity, which the PRTs have to help us on.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much. I've got a question for you, sir.

Am I to understand there's an upcoming governors conference later on -- I think it's next week from what I saw. Is that true? And if so, is -- what do you expect or what do you hope to see from that?

GEN. CARDON: Yes, there's a governors conference next week here.

And actually, we did this a little bit differently. First we asked the governors if they wanted the governors conference. They all agreed yes, which, you know, facilitates cooperation. And then second, we asked them what they wanted to talk about, which is mainly on security and economic development. And then we're working on bringing the ministers down from Baghdad, the appropriate ministers, to work with the governors.

Now, one of the complaints of the governors is, is that they're disconnected from the national government, that the ministers don't ever come down to see them. So, you know, this is a great opportunity to have this as one of these areas where we develop government capacity by just getting them together. And of course any time the governors meet and talk about things in a regional basis, I think it's a positive -- positive step.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, very good.

We've got a few minutes left here. Has anybody got any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, I have one, Jack, if we have time.

MR. HOLT: Oh, sure. Sure, Andrew.

Q Thanks. General, Andrew Lubin again from ON Point. When I was in Mahmudiyah, Babil province, during the winter-time with the 10th Mountain, they were telling me that JAM has turned the area from a Sunni area to a Shi'a area. They say a year ago it was 80-20 Sunni over Shi'a; now it's 80-20 Shi'a over Sunni due to ethnic cleansing.

Has this stopped or is JAM still that major of an influence in your area?

GEN. CARDON: Well, it's still that flip right there that you said. But I will say that JAM is under a lot of pressure just like AQ. As you know, Sadr went to Iran. When he came back, his organization split. There's parts of JAM that are not under his control. I think that's been pretty widely supported. And a lot of people are tired of JAM and their tactics, which in some ways mirror that -- and I'm talking the special groups of JAM, I'm not talking all JAM, but these special groups that are doing the sectarian violence and working, you know, against the coalition, people are tired of that violence too. And you sort of get this sense in many places that have dealt with this violence for a while that people are just sick and tired of this and want to get on with their lives. And they're banding together, not so much government, to start with, but the tribes, which then work with the government, but tribal to secure their areas, and they're forcing these extreme groups out.

In most cases these extreme groups are not locals. You know, they come in and they're facilitated by locals and, you know -- I'll go back to Arab Jabour. What we did up there is we used a biometrics



system to, you know, create identification across the population. Then you have everyone's picture so then you can use that, you know, to determine who's who. And that was very, very effective. And we're not the only ones doing that. Lots of units, and to include the Iraqis, are doing the same thing. So that's -- but you're right, there was quite a flip in Mahmudiyah between Sunni and Shi'a, and that's where we are right now.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us today. We look forward to having you back again. Maybe we can speak some more on the -- after the governors conference and see what has transpired and what changes take place.

Thank you very much for being with us, sir. Do you have any closing statement?

GEN. CARDON: (Off mike) -- which I always say, which is, you can be really proud of your soldiers. And, you know, they're doing great work in very tough conditions. You know, like the heat here, you know, it's pretty hot. Doing an awful lot of dismounted operations. And you can just be really proud of what they're doing.

And thanks for your support and what you're doing for our country. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. We look forward to speaking with you again. Brigadier General Edward Cardon, the deputy commanding general of Task Force Marne from MND-Central with us today for the Bloggers Roundtable.

Thank you, sir, very much.

GEN. CARDON: General, thank you very much.

Q Thank you.

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